

Christ Church Elbow Park Archives

Interview with Reverend Herbert O'Driscoll

Christ Church Elbow Park Oral History Project 2020

Interviewer: Frits Pannekoek

22 January 2020

E-mail Interview

Transcript of Reverend Herbert O'Driscoll

Interviewed on 22 Jan. 2021

Christ Church Elbow Park Oral History Project 2020

Interviewed by Frits Pannekoek

Frits Pannekoek, Interviewer

Reverend Herbert O'Driscoll, Narrator

Frits Pannekoek: Tell us something of your early life and what motivated you to the priesthood and then to Canada.

Rev. Herbert O'Driscoll: To grow up in the Ireland of the '30s and '40s was to know a world where the sacred was paramount. A powerful and all-pervasive Roman Catholicism framed all aspects of life, personal, professional and cultural. In that long ago Ireland all other traditions formed no more than a 4% minority.

For the most part, relationships between majority and minorities were pleasant and reasonable. The one area where minorities felt threatened was in that of marriage, where a marriage involving Catholic and Protestant meant the surrender to the Catholic of all involvement in the spiritual formation of any children born of the marriage.

In my growing years I found it possible to be aware of both worlds. A paragraph from one of my books expresses this best:

The church was all pervasive in our church lives, as it was for our Roman Catholic neighbours. Just as for them, the Angelus bell rang solemnly for us, punctuating our days in a way one did not find intrusive. Just as they did, we celebrated the lives of the major Saints and the feast days of our Lord's Mother. Just as in their schools the timetable was interspersed with daily periods of religious instruction such as Catechism, usually conducted by the parish priest, so it was with us during regular visits of the rector or curate.

As I said, the total life of the society was pervaded by the sacred. Thus one was formed to regard the sacred as an integral part of one's life and one's experience. For me this was strengthened by the consistent quality of the clergy involved in my life from childhood, through school and university to ordination.

To be ordained in that era was regarded as a very normal decision for one's life. Today it is a counter cultural act. I was ordained about a year and in my first curacy when a letter arrived from John Anderson, a Winnipeg rector, inviting me to join him in St Aiden's Parish. He had become aware of me through a first cousin of my mother who had immigrated to Canada in the '20s and had become his church warden.

I responded saying that I was obligated to the Church of Ireland for two years. A year later another letter arrived from John Anderson, who by now had become Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Ottawa. This time I said yes, and so arrived in Canada in the Fall of 1954. Almost a year later I returned to Ireland where my wife Paula (Lucy) and I were married and sailed together for Canada, to be followed a few years later by my two younger brothers and our mother, by this time widowed. Today, 65 years later, grateful for four children now middle-aged adults, eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, we have never regretted that decision.

A much fuller portrait of all this is drawn in my books, particularly in the chapter "The Past as Another Country" in my book *I will Arise and Go Now*.

Frits Pannekoek: You are a well-known hymn writer. What do you think are your most profound hymns? Why have they connected with people?

Rev. Herbert O'Driscoll: I think I have written at least 60 hymns. To list them and categorize them would be boring. Instead, a story or two.

Few realize the vast world you walk into when you write a hymn. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition you go back thousands of years. There was singing in the Temple in Jerusalem. We have glimpses of what the words might have been in some of the Psalms. On the last night our Lord spent with his disciples they sang a hymn as they left the upper room after sharing bread and wine. Mark tells us this in his gospel: "When they had sung the hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives."

I wrote my first hymn some time in the mid-sixties at the cottage on the shore of Shuswap Lake. It is in a number of hymnbooks, eventually being translated into Chinese in a handsome book published in Hong Kong for Christians on the mainland of China. I realize now it captured the winds of change that were beginning to blow at that time and have continued ever since! Its last stanza sang:

*Lord should the powers of the earth and the heavens be shaken;
Grant us to see you in all things, our vision awaken.
Help us to see
Though all the earth cease to be,
Your truth shall never be shaken.*

I wrote a hymn during the election of an Anglican Primate. Again it captured the zeitgeist of the time – massive change, transition, the church on a great Journey. Eventually it was included in a new hymnbook of the United Methodist church in the States, but not before they asked to change the first four lines. I had written:

*From the slave pens of the Delta,
From the ghettos on the Nile,
Let my people seek their freedom
In the wilderness awhile.*

It was the eighties. Great changes were painfully transforming the deep south. A letter came asking me if I would allow them to change those four lines, thus avoiding the expression “*slave pens in the delta*” in the very first line. The hymn is in a number of books. In that Southern Methodist book the hymn begins

*Let my people seek their freedom
In the wilderness awhile,
From the slave pens of the delta,
And the ghettos on the Nile.*

Looked at carefully, hymns mirror the age in which they are written. For a Christian Festival in Calgary in the eighties I wrote a hymn expressing Christian faith as essentially a life Journey. It too caught the spirit of the time and is widely used.

*Come and Journey with a Saviour
Who has called us from our birth;
Who has washed us in the waters,
And who loved us on the earth.*

Finally, another example of how hymn texts can develop with the passage of time. In the seventies I wrote a hymn celebrating Canada’s — especially Alberta’s — natural resources. A key verse went as follows:

*Deep from our rocks and rivers
Pylon and pipeline bear
Power for the pulse of nations,
Power we are called to share.
We who possess your bounty,
Dwelling in worlds of need,
Give us the grace of giving,
Guard us O God from greed.*

Sometime in 2010, a Canadian Cathedral asked for permission to use the hymn but did not wish it to include the word “pipeline.” By that time there were deep feelings developing about the development of fossil fuels. I was tempted to argue the point, feeling that even with our best

efforts to develop alternate energies we were going to need fossil fuels for some years. In the end I decided that, rather than forbid the use of the hymn, I would write an alternate stanza:

*Endless our land's resources,
Gifts to be used with care.
Spacious and long our borders,
Land we are called to share.
We who possess such bounty,
Dwelling in worlds of need;
Grant us the grace of giving;
Guard us O God from greed.*

The hymn was accepted for use. I had got across the moral demand of possessing much. I felt this better than a pointless argument about priorities which would certainly have resulted in the hymn being rejected. The new orthodoxies of our time leave little room for compromise.

I have been asked what I would choose as my “profound” hymns. The very nature of a hymn — a series of short stanzas that must have metre and rhyme for congregational singing, demands that profound thought must be expressed in simple and clear language. I would offer two efforts on my part to reconcile these two requirements, one devotional, the other more for intellect.

The first is in the form of a conversation between the human soul and God.

*“Where shall I seek thee?” asked my soul of God.
“Where may I find thee whom I love so much?”
“Seek in the hidden place, in ground well trod.
There will I walk with thee. There shall we touch.”*

*“Were I to pay thee,” said my soul to God,
“All that I have would be so poor in kind.”
“Silver and shining gold are less than wood.
All that I ask,” said God, “is heart and mind.”*

Lastly a hymn that grapples with the vastness of Creation and the mystery of Incarnation.

*Sing of a God in majestic divinity,
Seeding the heavens with numberless stars;
Forming our dust and our dreams of infinity,
God of our genes and the judge of our wars.*

*Sing of this God who in glory and mystery,
Chooses to lie in humanity's womb.
Enters the prison and pain of our history;
Rises triumphant and opens the tomb.*

Frits Pannekoek: You are well known as a great preacher. What makes a great preacher? Why have your messages resonated?

Rev. Herbert O'Driscoll: In recent years as Canada has become a more secular culture, the two words preaching and sermons have become essentially pejorative terms. A parliamentarian will say "Mr Speaker, I wish the Honourable Member would stop preaching to the house," or a newspaper editorial will refer to the articles of a certain columnist as sermonizing. Neither are meant to be complimentary.

In the mid 20th century the word Homily began to be used. In Anglicanism its use arose from the recovery of the Eucharist rather than the office of Morning Prayer as the main Sunday congregational gathering. The Homily was under a different discipline than the traditional sermon. Because it followed immediately after the three scripture readings it was expected to arise naturally out of these readings and to develop their themes. It was also expected to be of more modest length in a liturgy which seeks to balance both Word and Sacrament.

During the last century the use of three year lectionary, with its emphasis on the homily growing immediately out of the readings, has spread across a large part of the Christian spectrum. This meant that any ascribing of quality in preaching became based on the ability to reflect creatively, responsibly and succinctly about Holy Scripture. By the 1980s there had also been a rediscovery of the value of narrative preaching. It is easy to forget that one of the aspects of the Enlightenment was to devalue narrative as a tool for communicating. Story was thought to be something done by children. Very often it was done by women for children. Story was how indigenous people communicated. Serious thought and communication was considered to be informational, analytical, logical, and certainly not done by frivolous story telling!

NOTE: One of the ironies in all this is the way the English novel realized the value of Story much earlier than the theological world – but this must remain another story for another occasion.

Intriguingly, all through the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries there was an element of paradox in the relationship between scripture and Christian preaching. On the one hand, scripture, predominantly an immensely rich world of Story — mythical, historic and parabolic — was regarded as the primary source material of preaching, but it also acted as a challenge to much western preaching. The preacher was faced with a series of great Mysteries utterly impervious to explanation or analysis — the greatest being Incarnation, Resurrection, Ascension and the Pentecostal experience, not to mention the healing ministry of our Lord. Frequently the preacher was often reduced to a valiant struggle to explain these mysteries, all expressed in scripture in vivid narrative and images, reconciling them with the assumed sophistication of the "educated" western minds of his people.

Until the second half of the last century much Christian preaching was oblivious to powerful and shining qualities of scripture because the culture was oblivious of them. The emphasis of the

Enlightenment insisted that Explanation, Analysis, Concept and Logic, were the primary ingredients of communication. Story, Poetry, Imagination, Myth, Saga, Legend, all were treated with suspicion rather than recognized as treasure for inculcating wonder and awe in Christian preaching. Carefully crafted answers that intrigued the intellect while failing to elicit a spiritual response, tragically ignored any acknowledgement of mystery with its myriad questions that haunt the human heart.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH POWER

Nowhere is this illustrated in scripture more clearly than the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus and its consequences.

Nicodemus is a powerful bureaucrat, an academic, an intellectual. In today's terms, he has been to all the right conferences and subscribes to all the right magazines. He has his hand on the pulse of things. One day however, perhaps while returning from lunch to his office in the Temple complex, he overhears – just a sentence or two – the voice of a rural rabbi. Something about the voice intrigues him. A meeting is arranged. To do this was a considerable professional risk. Members of a ruling junta do not have evening drinks with minor rural community leaders.

Notice that the conversation begins by Nicodemus trying to put Jesus at ease in the presence of power. He soon realizes that this rabbi is not in the least ill at ease! Nicodemus find himself being probed at a level he is not used to. He becomes defensive and sarcastic. The very idea of being — literally of course — born again! How typically naïve. The conversation continues. Notice that John the writer gives us no moment when it ends. There is no moment of parting.

This conversation will haunt Nicodemus at a subconscious level. It will drive him to risk an intervention in defence of Jesus at a meeting of the Sanhedrin, one that gets a cutting, even threatening remark from Caiaphas in the chair. A week later it will haunt Nicodemus enough to have him on the vile crucifixion site in the early dawn, helping another Sanhedrin colleague to take down the corpse of Jesus, both of them risking their careers as prominent political figures.

Why did Nicodemus respond in this way to a single conversation? Because he was given two powerful images, both of which challenged his illusion of always being in control. One was the birthing image of his going down into the buried memory of his past and bringing into being the Nicodemus that he had never allowed to be born. The second was Jesus' image of the wind of the Spirit, a force that refuses to obey our will or intellect. It blows where and when it wills, echoing in our emotions rather than our thinking, as Nicodemus would discover with devastating consequences.

Two other examples may serve to indicate where I was coming from in my homilies in those Christ Church years.

PERSONA AND SHADOW

Jesus tells a parable of a rich man, Dives, and poor man, Lazarus. Using Jung's insight of the presence in us all of what he called a Persona and a Shadow — Persona being those things we are rich in and Shadow our poverty, our vulnerabilities — I began by suggesting that we think in terms of both Dives and Lazarus being in all of us. Notice where Lazarus is — at Dives' gate. We wish to distance ourselves from the poor parts of ourselves, our shadow. When Lazarus dies, something in Dives dies — in the parable he actually dies. Why? Because we can only be fully an individual if we acknowledge the reality of both Persona and Shadow.

Why in the parable does Jesus speak of Dives asking God to allow Lazarus to cross the great divide between them to give him a drink rather than requesting the drink from God? I suggest that it is because Dives at last realizes that unless he allows Lazarus to come into his life, unless he embraces the poverty of his life as well as the riches of his life, he will not know fullness of life.

Of course there is more but space precludes.

THE MISSING FACTOR

One more example of the use of scripture. Near the end of Paul's letter to the community in Corinth there is his magnificent reflection on the nature of love (I Cor 13). It begins with Paul listing qualities in life that are of immense value — eloquence, insightfulness, faith, generosity, self-sacrifice, but then saying that none of these are of value if they do not include love.

I had read this passage countless times in my ministry. One day in my office in Christ Church I read it once more and was struck with an utterly new insight. I have never realized that when Paul speaks of these strengths he is referring to his own strengths. I had never realized that I was hearing Paul, now middle aged, revealing the fact that, in spite of being rich in these strengths, he has always been poor in another area of life. He has never fully learned either to give love or to receive love.

With these three examples I have tried to give some idea of the sources I came to draw on for the Sunday homily in Christ Church. Two things I hope I have made obvious.

I had come to realize the power of Story for preaching. Various elements went into this learning. Two years as Warden of the College of Preachers in the National Cathedral in Washington made me realize that the essential difference between White preaching and both Hispanic and Black preaching was that, while the former had been robbed of the gift of Story by the Enlightenment, the other two, being excluded from the Enlightenment, had never lost it.

One passage in particular speaks eloquently of this:

Probably one reason why people will overhear a story with more sustained attention than they will give to many lectures and sermons obviously prepared for them and

addressed to them, is that narrative is of the nature of life itself. The form fits. We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love in narrative. All traditional societies have community stories in which the people live and by which they explain to themselves and to each other their social and metaphysical relationships. The chronology of a narrative locates the participants in time and place. Stories are heard and read because the experience of movement through time, common to the story and its hearers, reassures that we are alive and can enlarge our living by identifying, participating, appropriating, the experiences of others. This is true even if the narrative disturbs and shocks. And, if someone tells me a story large enough, with enough memory and enough hope to provide a context for my own personal narrative, then I am interested.

Perhaps it is time to list the influences that formed how I tried to communicate the Faith in those years in Christ Church. Indeed by this time I had become involved in many other places in a rather peripatetic ministry that, incidentally, the congregation generously allowed and supported.

I HAD COME TO REALIZE...

...that Holy Scripture is "a Story large enough, with enough memory and enough hope, for our own personal narratives."

...that even among those regular in worship the great narrative of the Bible, with its treasure house of specific stories, has been largely forgotten. This means of course that today's homilists have a wonderful opportunity to tell those stories as for the first time to many.

...that the vast quarry from which the gold of the faith is mined is the immensely rich deposit of Story in Holy Scripture.

...that we were all in a post-Enlightenment world where Story, once relegated to the edges of life, had returned to the west in powerful ways, no longer ancient but wonderfully contemporary, sometimes by way of indigenous voices we had culturally marginalized.

...that to tell scripture as Story, allowing the text to have its own integrity, can build bridges across the many ways we come to and receive Holy Scripture.

...that two realities had developed in the West in the decades of my ministry. The first was a deepening distrust of language, the second a growing resistance to all forms of hierarchy and authority. Persuasion and constructed argument had become something to resist. These things had begun to block the high road of argument, logic, explanation, and linear thinking. Therefore one had to penetrate the new barriers by reaching the listener by the ancient highway of Story, Saga, Dream, Poetry, Legend and Mystery.

...that the insights of Carl Jung can be richly used in the telling of Biblical stories.

...that the relationship between preacher and listener is formed far more at a subconscious level than we tend to think. I had read Stanley Kubrick's thought about how we relate to a play or film. He said,

An audience watching a play or film is in a state very similar to a waking dream. The dramatic experience becomes a kind of controlled dream. The film or play communicates on a subconscious level and the audience responds to the basic shape of the story on a subconscious level, as it responds to a dream.

I came to realize that this can also be true of narrative preaching.

...that the power of Story to express and communicate Christian faith extends beyond scripture even to the great Creeds of the Faith. This insight I owed to Richard Niebuhr:

We may remind ourselves that despite many efforts to set forth Christian faith in metaphysical and ethical terms of great generality, the only creed that has been able to maintain itself in the church with any approach to universality consists for the most part of statements about events... Even God was defined, less by metaphorical and moral character than by historical relations, as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

To be a Biblical preacher is to continue that tradition and to participate in the history of telling the Story.

Frits Pannekoek: What are the key theological upheavals faced by Anglicanism since 1952, the year of your ordination?

Rev. Herbert O'Driscoll: Ordained in 1952 and retiring in 1993, my forty plus years of ministry coincided almost exactly with that of Richard Holloway, a brilliant Scottish Anglican. He eventually became Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland. In one of his lectures he responds to the very same question, listing the theological movements that challenged church life throughout the second half of the 20th century. His experience reflects exactly my theological journey.

In Trinity College Dublin, I was introduced to what was called the NEO-ORTHODOXY OF KARL BARTH with its emphasis on the primacy of the text of Holy Scripture.

To the theological left of this were two brothers REINHOLD AND RICHARD NIEBUHR who formed ways for Christian faith and its scriptures to respond pragmatically to the complexity of a rapidly changing society.

Next came the work of RUDOLF BULTMANN, whose demythologizing was introduced to English speaking theologians by JOHN MACQUARRIE.

Then came the SECULAR THEOLOGIES of the 1960s, their most popular voice that of HARVEY COX. Following this came what was called the DEATH OF GOD THEOLOGY with its much too clever slogan "There is no God and Jesus is His Son." A leading voice was that of DON CUPITT for whom God was a human construct.

Following all these intellectual tides came the great experiential tide of the NEW PENTACOSTALISM, a spiritual quest that still enriches many Christians.

Next came LIBERATION THEOLOGY, placing Jesus and his risen life as impacting the political struggles of the poor and oppressed. One manifestation of this is FEMINIST THEOLOGY that continues to be greatly transformative in church and society.

Emerging from these came an interest in IGNATION SPIRITUALITY which offers the Gospel and reshaped much of its preaching in terms of Story, or NARRATIVE THEOLOGY.

Even as I list those various lens donned by Christian theology in the West, each gaining and losing disciples as the next tide flooded it; I am also conscious of deeper thinking that flowed like great underground rivers in that second half of the last century, and that certainly spoke to me. First, the rich psychological insights of Carl Jung, the mysticism of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the overall realization that my ministry was more and more being exercised in a post-Enlightenment world.

The other great challenge of priesthood throughout these decades was to remember that one was called beyond all changes of theological fashion to be a Pastor. One of the many gems from the Book of Common Prayer learned by heart in school spoke to this struggle, "Grant O God that among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

An added note: THE UNENDING CONVERSATION. A passage from the writing of an American intellectual named Kenneth Burke, quoted by Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity in a Time of Change* (pp. 19 and 20):

Where does the drama of history get its material? From the unending conversation that is going on at the point when we were born. Imagine that you enter a parlour. You come late. When you arrive others have long preceded you and they are engaged in heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause to tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had begun long before any of them got there, so that no one is present to trace for you all the steps that had gone before.

You listen for a while, then put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer them; another comes to your defence; another aligns him or her self against you to the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your

ally's assistance. However the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late. You must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

Frits Pannekoek: What transformations were you attempting to make to the life of the parish? Did you succeed?

Rev. Herbert O'Driscoll: One of the great silent transformations of the 20th century overarching the ministry of my generation was the rise of the primacy of the individual in western society. This has been so powerful and transforming that there simply isn't space in this kind of document to describe the countless ways it developed. A brilliant and succinct description comes from Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain. He writes of "the collapse of moral language, the disappearance of "I ought" and its replacement by "I want", "I choose", "I feel." To describe its effect in church life I will use an image.

Two dates, that of my ordination 1952, and my retirement 1993, straddle the decades of my ministry and include the decade spent in Christ Church.

If on a Sunday morning in 1952 you had asked the rector of Christ Church what he was looking at as he surveyed his congregation, he would — having first wondered why we were asking the question — answered in a way I will call "institutionally." He would have said, "I'm looking at the Anglican congregation of Christ Church Calgary." He would have meant a corporate entity formed of a common loyalty to such elements as the Bishop of the Diocese, the Prayer Book, Anglican tradition, Holy Scripture.

If, on the other hand, you had asked that question in the years of my own incumbency from 1984 to 1993, I would no longer have had the luxury of answering in those corporate/institutional terms. Such bonds had become so weak as to be vestigial.

Because the primacy of the individual in western society had become so dominant, I would have had to reply something like this: "I am looking at a couple of hundred individual personal spiritual journeys, each one in search of meaning and reassurance in a culture of relentless change, transition and fragmentation."

If my understanding of ministry in that era had one overall foundation from which I worked, this was the foundation. Incidentally, I believe the same reality has come to permeate the life of any western institution. Political parties, volunteer organizations, universities, schools, on and on... Leadership in every aspect of western society has to come to terms with this cultural fragmentation and the reality of the primacy of the individual.

Early in my ministry I recall an insight of Martin Marty, a brilliant Lutheran voice in Chicago who published *CONTEXT*, a very fine newsletter on the interface of religion and culture. As I recall, he had written, "There are always three things: fads, trends and tides. Fads you can ignore,

trends you need to be aware of, and, as you choose, explore or critique, but tides need careful examination before resisting them.”

The corollary of all this for me was that parish ministry called for an acknowledgement that the contemporary lives of Christ Church had become infinitely varied and deeply personal, and, perhaps sadly, distrustful of institution and tradition. I realized that to respond adequately required the development of whatever intuitive powers I had been given. Above all I learned to ask a single overriding question in any conversation or interaction: “What is the human agenda in this situation?”

Going back to the question that heads this reflection, I can only say that I felt the primary aim of ministry at that time – and this continues for Christian ministry as I write – was to draw together as much as possible this gathering of searching individuals into a company of pilgrims moving together through the cultural wilderness of the late 20th century.

The question above asks “Did I succeed”? One wishes the question could be given a simple answer.

In so far as the primacy of the individual remains the cultural context for parish ministry in this 21st century, I would submit as a measure of success the fact that I — and a wonderful Collegial team — Richard Lesueur, Kathleen Zang and Margaret Newman, were able to hand on to our successors a strong and viable Christian community.

Somewhere in the Talmud it is written: “It is not given to you to complete the work, but neither is it given to you to step back from doing the work.”

In other hands the work continues...

Frits Pannekoek: When you reflect on your incredibly rich life as a clergyman, what do you want to be remembered for? In particular, what do you want to be remembered for at Christ Church?

Rev. Herbert O’Driscoll: In boarding school in the 1940s it was common to have an autograph book in which you invited people to write. You might ask a special friend, or the rector of your parish, or some of your teachers, or — as they were more sternly called in those days — one’s Masters. If a boy invited the Headmaster to write in his book, the Headmaster always wrote this quatrain...

*When the Great Scorer
Comes to write against your name;
He’ll write not that you won or lost,
But how you played the Game.*

How distant in time those four lines seem today more than eighty years later. Their world is that of cricket, of empire, of things like valour and honour and courage. I think of them when I am asked the kind of question to which I am responding. My instinct is to respond with a short, crisp “I would like to be remembered for playing the Game, the great game of life, well, and by saying “well,” meaning “honourably.”

Two other memories come to mind when I am presented with this question, both from the morning of my ordination in Christ Church Cathedral Dublin.

One is a single sentence in the homily preached to us four ordinands that morning in July 1952. At a certain stage in the homily the preacher turned in the pulpit, pointed down towards the front steps of the chancel area and said very deliberately, “As you kneel before the Bishop, never forget that men have been ordained on that step for 950 years.”

That moment has never left me. I felt myself placed in a long succession of priesthood, a reality far greater in significance than my own transient existence. As it stretched back into the past so it flowed far into the future. On this great arc of ministry I was being privileged to offer in my lifetime whatever gifts I had been given.

That sense of possessing a long story would stand me in good stead in the turmoil of the age in which I would be called to minister. Years later I would hear an American academic named Frederick Turner say, “Sometimes the present can free us from the shackles of the past and help us to build the future, but it is also true that sometimes the past can free us from the shackles of the present and become our source for building the future.”

It was this sense of timelessness that I wished more than anything else to convey in that decade in Christ Church. It was a decade of unrelenting change, not just in the church. It's interesting that by that time people no longer referred to “changes” in this or that. The new reality was a single vast tide of massive “change” affecting every facet of life and relationships, as it still continues to do as I write this decades later. One of the effects of this is that post-modernity is so mesmerized by the wonders of its own fascinating present – a kind of cultural narcissism - that it becomes ahistorical.

In the face of this I was very conscious of the need to have a sense of those things that do not change. Years before, in school, I had learned by heart some of the great collects of Thomas Cranmer. As an adult, I had come to realize how he — in a changing world, and it is easy to forget that his lifetime was one of massive changes and discoveries — constantly spoke and wrote of the necessary balance between transience and permanence, between that which changes and that which does not change:

Grant O God that we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal; Grant O God that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this fleeting world may rest upon your eternal changelessness.

There is also a scriptural image that served well in this balancing of past and present, time and timeless, in the life of the congregation. I recall telling it more than once as a story. Scripture gives it to us in Exodus 13:19 and in JOSHUA 24:32.

Israel is about to set out on the journey into the wilderness. All is ready? No. There is something immensely important to Moses. He orders that they bring with them the bones of Joseph, their great ancestor whose political power enabled them to come to Egypt all those years ago.

Moses knew his history. He knew that before his death Joseph made his people promise to take his bones with them if they ever left Egypt in the future. Now was the time to fulfil that wish.

Some must have wondered why Moses was doing this. What use were these ancient bones, taking up space and weight on this desperate and dangerous Journey? After all, what practical use were they? We hear nothing about them for many years. Time would go by. The great journey would go on across the wilderness into the new land. Moses' life would end, as would that of his successor Joshua.

Only then do we hear again of these ancient bones. They bury them in the new land near Shechem. Joshua 24:32. The ancient bones become the foundation of the new.

Three millennia later, in a world that that long ago people could not have imagined, in a continent they could not know existed, we in Christ Church as a Christian congregation would be on a cultural and spiritual wilderness journey in the late 20th century. We would be surrounded by a tsunami of change. What did we need to take with us for this dangerous journey? What of the past was precious enough not to leave behind? What for us were our bones of Joseph?

I think more than anything else I would like our ten years together in Christ Church to be remembered as a time when we reached for the future without letting go the riches of the past.